

March 24, 2009

Testimony on CT Legal Services Funding – SB1157

My name is Lee-Ann Gomes and I am the Supervisor of Social Work for the City of Norwich's Human Services Department. I am here to ask for your assistance with the budget shortfall Legal Aid is facing due to the collapse of their IOLTA funding stream.

CT Legal is a tremendously valuable resource to clients and to social workers. Not having access to legal information in times of crisis can have dire consequences for the people we serve...it may mean the difference between remaining in their home or being locked out by a misinformed landlord...it may mean that a child is denied necessary medical care by someone misinterpreting a policy/procedure...it may mean that a social worker has a legal argument to hang her hat on rather than just an emotional plea for her client. There has to be one place left where clients and the remaining advocates can go to ensure justice...one final attempt at protection before the bad thing happens.

New and complex problems are arising for our clients...foreclosures of their landlord's property, employment loss that seems unjust but causes denial of UCOMP benefits, illegal lockouts from housing, allegations of child abuse that are directly due to poverty issues (e.g. is it abuse if you can't afford your oil bill?). We, social workers, need guidance on these issues, as do our clients.

I have cases where I've called CT LS and just a phone call or letter from them has changed the dynamics of the situation...Even just being able to say, "You know, I've checked with an attorney on this and what you're doing has no basis in law"...is a powerful and persuasive tool to help a clients...sometimes, even the police officers get it wrong and like an opinion from CT LS. There are no other resources to turn to for this type of assistance...As well intentioned as private sector attorneys can be, they have no time to sit with a low income client or social work on the phone a review of a case for free...nor do social service agencies have funds to pay attorneys for their time and council...

As the State of CT and the federal government start slashing programs and aid to the most needy in our communities it becomes even more vital that we protect what rights citizens have.

Why should we place funding in CT LS while programs for people are being cut? Because, they are the last firewall between people and imminent danger. Well, we all understand the realities of the budget crisis we find ourselves in. We realize adjusting postage and mileage accounts cannot make up these deficits. We must however, ensure that whatever is left of programs and services to the poor is well guarded and properly administered...that people have recourse. As the economy has worsened, everyone has become a little more desperate to protect their own interest, often at the expense of those who cannot protect themselves. Allow poor people to have at least the safeguard of CTLS.

Robert Kennedy once said...Each time a man (or a woman) stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he (or she) sends a tiny ripple of

hope..... those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance." -Robert Francis Kennedy, *speech at Day of Affirmation*,

CT LS attorneys and services offer our clients and us hope. Each time they assist them or us with an issue, we learn and carry those lessons forward. Create a current!!

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Lee-Ann Gomes
Supervisor
Norwich Human Services
